Development Education
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THE WORLD FOOD PROBLEM

A case study of a Home Economics teaching unit in Development Education

by Carol Dunstan

It is difficult to determine what initiates a concern for the plight of our fellow man, especially those that are far removed from us. Many factors must play a part in this and some circumstances more than others just fall into place. Through a process of reflection certain factors stand out as significant in motivating such a concern. Being concerned in this field yourselves, you may find it an interesting process to analyse what sparked your interest. My own education consisted of a humanities background taught by very concerned teachers who initiated discussion and interest in world issues. The opportunity to travel and live as a local within another culture heightened my interest.

The early years of my teaching training provided a very limited outlook as it emphasised the traditional English heritage. The course has since expanded and so too has the scope of the subject. As I see Home Economics, it has a great deal of potential for highlighting the extent of the world food problem specifically, and the more general concept of world development. Food is a key issue in this and therefore both the social and physical effects of a deficiency of food can be highlighted through the study of nutrition and child development.

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As an educator I have developed this unit as a means of fostering concern for world issues. This is in keeping with one of the main overall aims of the course of the Year 11 level, i.e., to promote an appreciation and tolerance of different ways of life through a cross culture approach to subject material and development of social awareness.

UNIT FRAMEWORK

The place of this Unit in the course "Human Development and Society." The course has five broad topics to be integrated together:

topics -
1. Social Significance of Food
2. Australian Food Patterns
3. The World Food Problem
4. Detailed Study of the Nutrients
5. Human Development and Growth through the Life Cycle

The primary emphasis is on the social rather than the scientific significance of the topics. A cross cultural approach has been used as far as possible to encourage this emphasis.

CONTENT RATIONALE

Unit or Work on "The World Food Problem":

A. Preparation and background material
B. Identification of the problem
C. The implications of the problem
D. The causes of the problem
E. Solutions currently being applied and evaluation
F. Recommendation and potential for further action

(for details of each of the six topics and their aims, refer to Appendix)

As the food shortage was the specific topic to be studied, the introductory material was centred around establishing in detail why food is necessary. Then the question was raised as to what specific foods and nutrients were necessary. This was covered very generally and the focus brought onto protein. Protein is the most important nutrient for growth and development. It is the nutrient which shows greatest disparity in distribution throughout the world. This inter-relates the work on the nutrients, growth and development, and the social problems associated. Through a detailed knowledge of the physiological functions of protein, greater depth of knowledge of the implications of a protein deficiency can be obtained. The implications of a deficiency on the growth and potential of a child is studied in greatest detail, as this is where the greatest impact is seen. The quality of protein available throughout the world varies drastically especially as compared to the quality available in the Australian diet.

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To show the relative nature of our understanding of starvation and malnutrition, these terms are defined and examined. The students are asked to question their own feelings of hunger, and then to consider the people who are really starving. We therefore start with the individual gradually working out his/her experiences. This also introduces the extent of the problem.

To highlight the size of the problem, maps showing graphically the proportion of the world living on a low protein, low calorie diet are used. Through discussions on Australia, it is highlighted that the average food intakes do not show discrepancies within the country, as indicated by the Australian aborigines diet.

Once the size and magnitude of the problem have been identified, the social effects are investigated. The social implications of the problem are given at three levels. This is where the work on protein is specifically applied again when looking at the effects of a deficiency on the individual, retarded physical growth and mental development, resistance to disease, and general apathy. These are then multiplied to the community level in terms of a high infant mortality, low morale, lowered ability to work and take initiative. Thirdly, this is extended to the national level. Through the three levels it is emphasised that there is a cyclic effect with not just one cause nor one solution. This cyclic concept is introduced here and referred back to later when evaluating what is currently being done and what possibly could help.

By establishing the extent and implication of the shortage of food it is intended to bring the students to the point of asking "Why?" "What are the causes?" The very obvious causes usually offered are discussed first. A gradual process of conscious raising of the issues and extension of the student's view of the world has been attempted and now a critical look at the superficial reasons often offered as the causes of the problem is needed. It is emphasised that there is not one simple cause nor one specific answer.

At this stage there may be a tendency to become overwhelmed by the enormity of the situation and this may lead to a feeling of futility. To counteract this and to try to deal with more concrete manageable issues, the sutdents choose a group of people to study in detail. By working through a specific case it can be highlighted that there are many issues involved, including those related to the culture and the socio-political state of the people. Through students covering different topics and eventually sharing their work with other members of the class, it can be seen that one solution will not apply in all situations.

There is a danger in just raising consciousness of the problem and not guiding a change in behaviour and attitudes. Firstly, there can be a difficulty if the problem is seen as far too large and as being far beyond anyone doing anything at a grass roots level - the fatalistic attitude. Secondly, if there is identification of where the problems exist, without an examination of the economic and political causes, action is seen in terms of a need to do more of what has already been tried, rather than challenging our present behaviour and life-styles. Both these outcomes may be more detrimental than helpful as they discourage any definite change and encourage

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a continuation of the present system. Dudley Seers points out similar sentiments in his review of the film "Five Minutes to Midnight".

(1) "To feel the emotion of pity, which is deliberately worked, may for many people be a substitute for action..."

Therefore the topic must be extended beyond this to pose the question, "Why have we not been able to solve the problem?" In doing this, a critical examination of the existing programs needs to be undertaken, and an understanding of the economic structures at work, and their underlying politics.

This is a more delicate task and must explode many of the previous solutions put forward. Why has the Green Revolution not solved the problem? How beneficial is the sponsoring of one child to the solving of the problem? Three levels are examined, the international, national and local agencies.

One of the key problems to convey to the class is that of powerlessness. To affluent students sitting in a very pleasant classroom setting, it is very easy to make suggestions for people to form groups and take community action. Role playing was used partially here to highlight these feelings.

After critically looking at the existing work being carried out at the three levels, it is necessary to bring the issues back to the individual, and put them in a more positive light. There is nothing to be gained by criticising and not offering alternatives, but there is also a danger of giving simplistic, unrealistic solutions. Through the individual projects that students investigated, it can be seen that action needs to be appropriate according to the problem. With this, there is also a need to question our own way of life and consumption pattern.

This last topic is the most difficult but most important. What can the individual do and what is the best course of action? A speaker presenting political solutions was seen by the students as too biased. The more controversial issues need to be handled with balance if they are not to be counter-productive. Rather than look at the political and economic solutions, which are the more abstract, a critical examination of their own lifestyles can be made. The concept of "Spaceship Earth" is thereby used, of limited resources and the disparity between the quantity of resources we consume compared to others.

SOME PROBLEMS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To collect information and ideas, I contacted agencies and interviewed a number of personnel. This was a very time-consuming task, especially as there is no co-ordination of resources. Being realistic as to the time teachers normally have for the collection of outside resources, I feel much good material is not getting through to the classroom. It is fragmented in too many different places. It is often necessary to preview the materials beforehand and this is difficult when they are widely spread.

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The actual material I would like to see more of is factual statistics which are standardised for easy comparison. There is an abundance of statistics on population size, but in my particular field a lack of standardised statistics on different average protein intakes or Kilojoule intakes for different countries in a form that can be easily compared is lacking. Materials generally which give comparisons, especially to Australia, are valuable as they bring the information back to the individual. Case studies are another means of personalising otherwise dry factual information.

The whole question of what the individual can do was a difficult area for which to find material. Case studies of action by individuals and groups both here and in other countries would be helpful.

Videos are becoming far more useful in schools than films or posters. They are very transportable and convenient, and schools are easily able to keep their own copies.

There are a number of problems associated with the use of speakers. Liaison with the school is necessary to ascertain the types of students, the level and the approach which would be suitable. There is a tendency to use a set package of slides and a set script. A more flexible approach is needed in terms of time, type of material and approach suitable to students and subject. Many were surprised that Home Economics teachers would be interested in this field. There is a tendency to try to convey a large quantity of factual information within a short time. For a speaker to be of value, it is necessary for both the teacher and speaker to be clear what are the main points they wish to get across, rather than isolated facts.

The area of teacher education is important here. The teachers will have the skills and ability to teach these issues if they are motivated and aware, so it is at teachers colleges and tertiary institutions that they must be exposed to the ideas and materials available.

CRITICUAL EVALUATION OF THE UNIT

Within the restrictions of the subject and time, there is a limit on the extent to which the real issues raised in this unit can be explored. This type of work would be most effective in the integration of a unit taught concurrently across social studies and economics, thereby really coming to a deeper understanding of the problem, rather than covering superficially the economic and political implications. This would also mutually reinforce ideas.

There has been a general raising of consciousness, but little else. After thinking through the influences that stimulated my interest in the area, I am heartened that maybe the effect is not seen immediately and it is likely to be unrealistic to hope for a rapid change.

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(1) Dudly Seers, Pity and Politics in Learning for Change in World Society, London World Studies Project, 1976.

APPENDIX

COURSE OUTLINE

Topic and aims:

1. What Food We Need
   Students to understand the importance of protein in the diet.

   To understand that different types of diet have different sources and qualities of protein.

   To promote an appreciation of the advantaged diet we have available.

   To be skilled at using food composition tables and comparing foods nutritionally.

2. Where Is There a Shortage
   To be able to identify where there is a shortage of food and the extent of this problem.

   To appreciate that hunger is relative and discrepancies exist within and between countries.

3. What Effect Does This Have?
   To understand the effects of a deficiency of protein and calories on an individual, the community and nation.

   To understand the cyclic nature of this effect.

   For students to appreciate the resulting lack of control individuals have in the cycle.

4. What Are the Causes?
   For students to question what causes the shortage of food to some people.

   To critically examine some of the claimed causes.

   To understand that there is not one simple solution.

   For students to research into a particular group analysing the present situation and make recommendations.

   To understand the inequitable distribution of protein.

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5. What Is Being Done?
   To critically examine the existing programs.

   To evaluate the effectiveness of these programs.

   To make the distinction between different types of aid and the motives behind these.

6. What Can Be Done?
   For students to be questioning action they can take and changes that can be effective.

   For students to propose viable propositions to their area of research.

   To appreciate that the solutions have to suit the problem. That there is different action that can be taken by individuals and action groups and from a Government level.